

### Bidialectalism Diatribe

**1703 J. QUICK** *Dec. Wife's Sister Lett.*, Possibly this poor Diatribe may contribute something thereunto. (From the online OED for *diatribe*).

Here is the deal on bidi, or at least the view from a quantitative sociolinguistic variationist. And that is the first, foundational point of a bidi investigation: Your view of the term is drastically different depending on the academic background/field of the scholar. Realize that the term is a creation of the 1960s (I believe) and is predominantly an educational term. If you know about education scholars' views of language, you know that they do not always mesh well with linguists' views of language. The term bidialectalism is a great example. Educational folk, then as now, use the term to mean something like "switching from stigmatized language variation patterns (LVPs) to nonstigmatized LVPs." Their sense of the term "dialect" is akin to socially unacceptable language. Even in sophisticated educational work (like that by Craig and Washington), the term *dialect* has a meaning no linguist would use.

This difference leads to point number two: The term "dialect". The term "dialect" is a nonscientific term and does not have a precise definition. In modern variationist usage, it probably means "the language patterns of a geographic or social group". I have tried to avoid the use of the term in my own writing, and when I do use it, I stick to a geographic/social

frame of reference. But either way, it refers to the aggregated LVPs of a group. Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968) strongly argued that the "grammar" of a language only emerged at the level of the speech community, not the level of the individual (Chomskyian competence). The trouble with the term "dialect" is that it has no usefulness referring to the language of an individual: I can say that a speaker is a speaker of a dialect, but I cannot refer to a speaker's dialect. The term "idiolect" was coined by Bernard Bloch in 1948 to handle the language of an individual, but W,L,H 68 banished the term "idiolect" (it is back now, but it has been a while). For this reason, I use the term LVP to refer to a single "dialect feature" as used by an individual. The import of this unscientific definition is that the term "dialect" can't handle even the strain of a nonce term like "monodialectal"; no speaker is the complete representation of a dialect.

Beyond the philosophical lackings of dialectological terms, there are some empirical concerns about bidialectalism. Once we get away from the educational view of bidi, we are forced to ask the following question: Receptively bidi or productively bidi? Educational papers rarely ask this question<sup>1</sup>. The answer to the "receptively bidi" question should be obvious: All humans are receptively bidi. If the characteristics (lexicon, morphology, syntax, phonology) are similar enough for a speaker's

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is "Weener, Paul D. 1969. Social dialect differences and the recall of verbal messages. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 60: 194-99."

language variety to be mutually intelligible (yet geo-socially distinct in some way), then it belongs to a different dialect of the same language. From an evolutionary perspective, receptive bidi would be advantageous. (Of course, the definition of "a language" is a tricky one: The term *language* is also a nonscientific term.)

The other question, productive bidi, is much trickier. Translating the term "dialect" here, we get something like the following: Productive bidi would mean that a speaker, in natural conversation, could produce the language variation patterns of one social/regional group, and then at another time, produce the language variation patterns of another social/regional group. From a variationist perspective, this would include everything from the configuration of vowel space to the rate of the phonological patterns to the rate of the morphological patterns, and even syntactic differences would have to be switched. The litmus test would be if native speakers of each region/group would consider the speaker as a native.

So can a speaker learn "a second dialect"? Sure. Chambers (1992)<sup>2</sup> shows that a critical age factor has a role to play in this process, where the younger child eventually sounded (mostly) like a native, but the older kids never sounded native like. Some educational professionals ask at

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<sup>2</sup> Chambers, J. K. 1992. Dialect acquisition. *Language* 68:673-705.

this point, “Well, if children can learn a second dialect, then wouldn’t they be bidialectal? Wouldn’t we be able to get our {put your vernacular speakers of choice here} to learn School English?” The caveat for a variationist is that productive bidi requires more than “learning a second dialect”. It requires that you maintain the original set of LVPs. For Chambers's subjects, they were originally Canadian, then they moved to England: Did they sound Canadian when they went back to visit? No, they didn't. No study has ever shown where the original set of language characteristics was maintained. Such a study would be the gold standard for testing productive bidialectalism. I believe this path of study has implications for the model of language in the mind.

I argue that humans are not capable of productive bidi. There is no evolutionary motivation for it. If all humans are receptively bidi, there is no need for humans to be productively bidi.

Do speakers switch some language variation patterns at times (perhaps to accommodate to an audience)? Sure. We call it code switching or register shift. All humans have different language styles: It is a universal of language. But a handful of language variation patterns does not a dialect make.

When education folk write about bidi, what they want is for those kids

(almost always AAVE speakers in the US) to stop using stigmatized forms in certain situations. So they are aiming for an "informed" style switching that responds to the formality of the situation. No educational paper I have read has been concerned about nonstigmatized features of a dialect like AAVE (e.g. perhaps phonological vowel space for AAVE speakers).

When I explain the "variationist" view about such things to education folk, they feel my argument is too technical and missing the point. The point they feel I am missing is to teach nonstandard speakers a variety of standard English (by eliminating stigmatized forms: Remember that Standard English (especially in the US) is defined by what it does not have: stigmatized forms). I understand that point (even if I don't always agree with it), but that is not my point as a variationist.

Now, if you have a different situation, I would be glad to hear about it. I am always quite willing to be wrong (I get to be wrong everyday).